

IABC Africa Drumbeat

AUGUST 2026

Building an Inclusive, Connected and
Proudly African IABC



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Introducing our 2026/27 IABC Africa Regional Board



Christine Breet
Chair



Nkem Emezie-Ejinima
Vice Chair



Yemi Adeyemi
*Past Chair &
Director of Governance*



Therésa Lee
*Treasurer &
Conference Director*



Riana Sinden
*Director of Professional
Development & Events*



Njideka Agbo
*Director of West
Africa Interest
Group*



Carol Warui
*Director of East
Africa Interest
Group*



Nengi Amadi
*Director of
Membership
Communication*



Elsabe Coetzee
*Director of
Quill Awards*

Introducing our 2026/27 Senior Coordinators supporting Board Members



Stella Marion Athieno
*East Africa
Interest Group*



Tashila Hans
Quill Awards



Grace Thuo
*Professional
Development &
Events*



Beryl Ehdor
*Membership
Communication*



Geneviève Engeström
Digital Communications



Natalie Patch
Secretariat



Amanda Hamilton-Atwell
Board Advisor



Letter from the Chair

Dear IABC Africa members and friends,

I am very happy to introduce myself as the new Chairperson of IABC Africa.

Many of you already know me through IABC, the Quills, certification, professional development sessions or our regional conversations. For those I have not yet met, I look forward to getting to know you and learning more about the work you do, the challenges you face and what you would like to see from IABC Africa in the year ahead.

I also want to start by saying thank you.

Thank you to Dr Yemi Adeyemi, our outgoing chair, for his leadership and contribution to the region. He has helped keep IABC Africa moving forward and has given generously of his time and insight. I also want to thank Camilla Osborne for her guidance on governance and for the support she has offered during this transition. I have already valued their advice, encouragement and willingness to help as we take this next step together.

I am stepping into this role with great excitement, but also with a very clear understanding that IABC Africa belongs to its members. This is not only a board or leadership structure. It is a professional community made up of communicators across the continent who care about the standard, value and impact of our work.

My vision for 2026/27 is to help build an IABC Africa that feels inclusive, practical, connected and proudly African.

For me, an inclusive African IABC means that more communicators across the continent can see themselves in this region. It means making space for different countries, sectors, career stages, and professional realities. It means listening better, reaching wider and making sure our programmes and conversations feel relevant to the people we serve. We have a strong foundation, and now we have an opportunity to build on it.

In the year ahead, we will focus on growing membership, creating more value for members, supporting professional development, recognising excellent work and strengthening the African voice within the global IABC community. We want members to feel that IABC Africa is useful, welcoming and worth being part of.

Professional development will remain a key part of this. We want to create more opportunities for members to learn, share, prepare for certification, engage with global standards and build confidence in their practice. We are also exploring new ideas and partnerships to help us offer more structured learning opportunities for African communicators.



Recognition is another important priority. The Quill Awards give us a powerful platform to celebrate excellent communication work in our region. They also help us show the real value that strategic communication brings to organisations, communities and society. We are also exploring new ways to recognise emerging talent, including an Emerging Communication Leaders in Africa initiative.

A major highlight for us will be the IABC Africa conference. This is the big event we are working towards, and I am genuinely excited about what it can become. We want the conference to bring people together, create useful conversations and showcase the quality of communication leadership across Africa.

The conference will give us a chance to discuss the issues shaping our profession, including leadership communication, AI, trust, reputation, change communication, stakeholder engagement, measurement, and the future of work. It will also be a space where communicators from major corporations, consultancies, mining houses, education, manufacturing, the public sector and many other environments can connect, learn and share ideas. Most importantly, we want the conference to feel relevant and energising. We want people to leave with new ways of thinking, practical ideas, and a stronger sense of belonging to a professional community.

IABC Africa has so much potential because our members have so much to offer. Across the continent, communicators are doing thoughtful, brave and important work, often in complex environments. We need to tell those stories more confidently. We need to learn from each other more often. And we need to make sure that Africa is not only part of the global communication conversation but helps shape it.

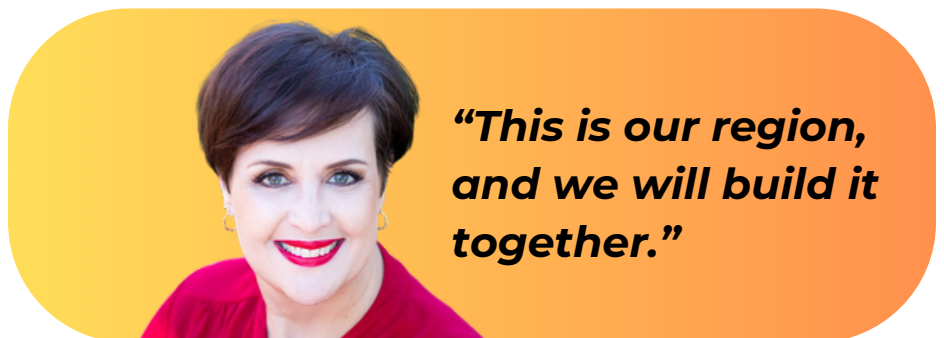
I also want to invite more members to get involved. You do not have to take on a big role to make a difference. You can attend an event, share an idea, invite a colleague, volunteer for a project, enter the Quills, mentor an emerging communicator or simply tell us what would make IABC Africa more valuable to you.

This is our region, and we will build it together.

Thank you for the trust, support and energy that so many of you already bring to IABC Africa. I look forward to working with you, learning from you and helping to create a region that is more inclusive, more visible and more connected in 2026/27.

Warm regards,

Christine Breet, SCMP®
Chair, Africa Region





Letter from the Past Chair

Dear IABC Africa members and friends,

There is a saying that leadership is less about the position you hold and more about the people you serve and inspire, as well as the future you help create.

As I write my final “Letter from the Chair” for this edition of Drumbeat, I do so with a heart full of gratitude and a deep sense of fulfilment. Serving this remarkable community over the past year has been one of the greatest honours of my professional life. It has reinforced my belief that while Africa is rich in diversity, our greatest strength lies in our ability to come together, learn from one another and collectively shape the future of our profession.

Looking back, I am proud not simply because of what we achieved, but because of how we achieved it.

Together, we strengthened the visibility of IABC Africa, expanded conversations that matter, celebrated excellence, invested in professional development and created more opportunities for communicators across the continent to connect and grow.

Through Drumbeat, our webinars, and online presence, we continued telling the story of an Africa that is confident, collaborative and increasingly influential in the global communication profession.

We also remained committed to raising professional standards. Our webinars tackled the defining issues of our time; from AI and ESG to change leadership, employee well-being and geopolitical uncertainty. Our certification initiatives saw more African professionals earn internationally recognised credentials, further strengthening the strategic communication capability of our continent.

Yet, if you were to ask me what I hope my tenure will be remembered for, my answer would not be the number of webinars we held, the Silver Quills awards we presented or the plans for our upcoming conference. I hope it will be remembered as a year in which we strengthened relationships. A year in which more communicators discovered that they belonged to something bigger than themselves.

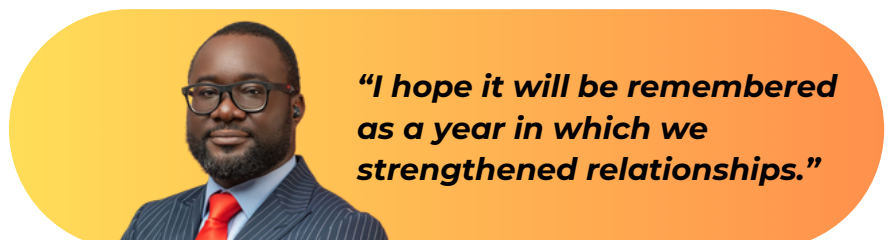
As I hand over the leadership of IABC Africa to our veteran communicator with many awards on her desk; Christine Breet, I do so with great confidence. I know she will lead with excellence, and I look forward to supporting her and the Board in my new role as Past Chair and Director of Governance. I am equally honoured to go on to serve as a Director on the International Executive Board (IEB), ensuring that our members' perspectives, experiences and innovations continue to shape conversations on the global stage.

To all our colleagues across the continent, thank you. Thank you for believing in the vision, for giving generously of your time and expertise, and for proving that volunteer leadership can achieve extraordinary things when united by purpose.

It has been the honour of a lifetime to serve as your Chair.

Warm regards,

Yemi Adeyemi PhD, SCMP®
Past Chair, Africa Region





FEATURE STORY

Strategic Communication When the Stakes Are High

In Conversation with Christine Breet



When Words Save Lives: Lessons from an Award-Winning Campaign

Communication is often measured through awareness, engagement and reputation. But what happens when communication becomes a risk mitigation tool capable of influencing organisational stability and helping to prevent harm? Gold Quill winner Christine Breet shares lessons from an award-winning campaign where the stakes could not have been higher.

Introduction

Christine Breet's recognition as Boutique Agency of the Year and recipient of a Best of the Best Gold Quill Award is more than a celebration of professional excellence. It is recognition of communication's power to influence outcomes in some of the most sensitive and complex environments organisations face.

Reflecting on the recognition, Breet explains that the awards are meaningful because they affirm that communication can make a real difference when the stakes are high.

"This was not work that was done for visibility or awards. It was work done in a complex, emotional and sensitive environment where people needed clarity, dignity, consistency and trust."

Q1. What do these recognitions represent for you personally, your team and your clients?

Personally, it still feels slightly unreal. I have spent more than 30 years doing this work, often behind the scenes and usually when something difficult is happening. Recognition at this level tells me that the quiet, careful work matters.

For our team, it proves that size does not determine the standard of the work. We are small, experienced and very hands-on. Our associates join us according to the needs of each project.

Elsabe Coetzee, who is also the IABC Africa Director of Quills, worked with me on this project. Her input was invaluable. We challenged each other, tested the thinking and remained close to the work from beginning to end.

Nobody disappears into a large project team or hides behind a job title.

For our clients, the awards validate the trust they placed in us. They allowed us into difficult conversations, shared uncomfortable realities and gave communication a proper seat at the decision-making table.

The trophies may sit in our office, but the work belongs to everyone who contributed.

Q2. When did you realise this project could have a significant organisational impact?

*Quite early, although I did not immediately think, "This could win an award."
I thought, "We need to keep people alive."*

That was the reality of the project. During earlier rounds of retrenchments/layoffs, protests had turned violent and people had lost their lives. We knew the announcement could trigger fear, anger and a deep sense of injustice. The community of the client was also political volatile.



The decisions affected people's jobs, families, homes and futures. Rumours could move faster than facts. One badly handled message could inflame an already volatile situation.

Our first measure of success was not the number of newsletters sent or meetings held. It was whether everyone went home safely.

That changed the role of communication completely. We were not simply explaining a business decision. Communication became part of the organisation's risk control. It helped leaders identify danger, hear concerns, correct misunderstandings and respond before tension escalated. We literally had to communicate in a way that helped save lives.

When communication begins preventing harm rather than simply reporting activity, you know it has moved into a different league.

Q3. Without revealing confidential client details, what were some of the biggest communication challenges you had to navigate, and how did you approach them?

The hardest part was communicating honestly while some decisions were still being worked through.

People wanted certainty. The organisation did not always have it. Silence was not an option, but pretending to know more than we did would have destroyed trust.

We had to work with fear, anger, organised labour, legal requirements, operational pressure and a very active rumour mill. Sometimes all before breakfast.

We also knew that communication could not do this alone.

We worked closely with HR and with other specialist companies that brought their own expertise to the process. Each team had a different responsibility. HR managed the people and labour processes. Other partners supported the legal, operational and specialist requirements.

Our role centred on the human and emotional side. We had to help people hear an extremely difficult message, understand what it meant and know where they could ask questions or seek support.

Our approach was simple, although not easy. Listen first. Separate facts from assumptions. Train people where needed. Give leaders clear language. Create regular opportunities for questions. Track what people were hearing and feeling. Then adjust quickly.

We also made sure communication was not only top-down. People needed a way to respond, challenge, suggest and be heard.

It was a team effort. The quality of the outcome came from different experts working towards the same goal.

Q4. One of your key messages is that communication starts with listening. How can communicators better understand stakeholder concerns before developing communication strategies?

We need to stop arriving with the answer before we have heard the question.

Spend time where the work happens. Speak to people who will experience the change, not only those approving it. Ask what they already know, what they fear, what they believe and what they are not saying in formal meetings.

Listen for patterns, but also notice the outliers. One unusual comment may reveal a risk that a survey, listening group or other conversation missed.

In our case, listening helped us understand not only what people were asking, but also what sat underneath the questions. A question about timing might really be about fear. A question about benefits might be about whether someone could continue paying school fees or supporting a family.



That emotional meaning matters.

I also ask practical questions. What will this mean on a normal Tuesday morning? What could make someone resist? Who do people trust when they are unsure? Where will the rumours start?

Good listening is not a courtesy exercise. It is research. It gives you the evidence to build a strategy that works in the real world, not only in a slide deck.

Q5. You mention that clarity and honesty are more important than having all the answers. In today's environment of uncertainty and misinformation, what practical advice would you give leaders communicating during periods of change or crisis?

Say what you know. Say what you do not know. Say what happens next.

Leaders often delay communication because they want a complete answer. By the time they have it, the information gap has usually been filled by WhatsApp, speculation and somebody's cousin who apparently knows everything.

Do not use complicated language to make an uncomfortable message sound better. People notice. Plain language shows respect.

Leaders must also understand that people do not only hear the words. They watch the leader's face, tone and behaviour. They notice whether the person appears distant, defensive or genuinely concerned.

Train leaders before they enter the room. Help them understand likely reactions. Give them clear facts, but do not turn them into robots reading a script.

Communicate more than once. A single town hall will not carry a difficult change. People hear information differently when they are worried. They may need time before they can even formulate a question.

Most importantly, do not promise certainty when none exists. Promise honesty, regular updates and a clear route for questions. Then keep that promise.

Q6. As the founder of a boutique consultancy, you have shown that small teams can produce globally recognised work. What do you think gives boutique agencies a unique advantage?

We are close to the work.

The person who sits in the first client meeting is usually still there when the difficult questions arrive.

There are fewer handovers, fewer layers and less chance of the strategy becoming diluted on its journey through the agency.

Boutique teams can also move quickly. We do not need a committee meeting to arrange the next committee meeting.

Our clients work directly with senior specialists. That matters when the issue is sensitive, political or high-risk. Experience helps you recognise what is not being said and when the official brief is not the real brief.

We also bring in the right associate for the work. We do not try to pretend that one person can do everything. The project determines the team, not the other way around.

Being small is not the same as thinking small. It simply means every person must bring judgment, curiosity and a willingness to get their hands dirty.



Q7. Looking back at your Gold Quill entry, what do you think impressed the judges most? Was there a particular aspect of the strategy, execution or measurement that made the difference?

I believe the difference was the connection between the business need, the communication strategy and the results.

We did not begin with channels. We began with the risk facing the organisation and the people affected by it.

The central risk was not low newsletter readership. It was the possibility of violence, protest action and the loss of life. That gave the communication strategy a very clear purpose.

Every activity had a reason. Every message supported a specific outcome.

Measurement was also built in from the start. That is critical. You cannot arrive at the end of a project and suddenly ask, "So, did it work?"

We established a baseline before the process began. We measured understanding, sentiment, concerns and risks throughout the project. We adjusted the communication when the evidence showed that something was not landing as intended. We then measured again at the end.

The measures went beyond counting emails, meetings and posters. We looked at what people understood, how they responded, whether concerns were addressed and what changed in the wider process.

We also linked communication to the business impact.

In our case, people remained safe. There were no violent protests, demonstrations or actions against the company. The closure process went ahead in an orderly way, without the disruption many had feared. Those were not communication outputs. They were organisational outcomes.

Of course, communication did not achieve this alone. HR, leaders and the other specialist partners all played critical roles. We showed the communication contribution clearly and backed it with evidence. Judges can tell when measurement has been added at the end to make an entry look impressive. Ours was part of the work from the beginning.

Q8. Many African communicators aspire to enter the Gold Quill Awards but are not sure whether they are ready. What would you say to encourage them?

Do not wait for a glamorous global campaign with a giant budget.

Some of the strongest work happens in mines, schools, hospitals, municipalities, factories, community organisations and small businesses. African communicators solve difficult problems every day, often with limited resources and extraordinary creativity.

Start by asking whether the work solved a real problem. Was the approach based on evidence? Did the audience respond differently? Can you prove what changed?

Look beyond activity. A busy campaign is not necessarily an effective campaign.

Build measurement into the work before you begin. Get a baseline. Track progress. Measure again at the end. Then connect the communication results to the wider business or organisational impact.

Read the criteria before you write the entry. Attend the IABC Quill webinars and master classes. Empower yourself. Gold Quill rewards strategic thinking, not expensive production.

And please do not disqualify yourself before the judges have even seen the work. Enter. The worst outcome is that you receive useful feedback. The best outcome may involve a rather emotional trip to an awards stage.



Q9. What role has IABC played in your professional journey, both as a practitioner and as a leader within IABC Africa?

IABC gave me a professional home.

It connected me with communicators who take the work seriously and who understand that communication is both a discipline and a responsibility.

Through certification, judging, professional development and the awards process, I have had to test my own thinking against international standards. That has made me a better practitioner.

It has also given me friendships across countries and continents. That part is easy to underestimate. Consulting can be a lonely profession. Having a trusted global community makes a difference.

My leadership role in IABC Africa carries a responsibility that I feel deeply. Africa has exceptional communication talent. We need to make that talent more visible, create more opportunities for professional growth and ensure African experience forms part of the global conversation.

IABC has helped shape my career. I now want to help open that door for others.

Q10. Finally, what one piece of advice would you leave with communicators across Africa who want to create work that truly changes outcomes?

Be brave enough to ask what the organisation is really trying to change.

Do not accept "We need a campaign" as the full brief. Keep asking until you understand the business need, the human reality and the decision people must make.

Work with the wider team. Communication is rarely the only answer. HR, operations, leadership, legal teams and other specialists may all have a role.

Know what belongs to communication. In our case, it was helping people process an emotionally devastating message without allowing fear and anger to turn into violence.

Listen carefully. Speak plainly. Measure from the start.

Know your baseline. Track what changes. Measure the result. Then ask the question that matters most. What difference did the communication make to the organisation and to the people affected?

Beautiful communication may win attention. Useful communication helps people act.

Sometimes, it helps keep them alive.



Further Reading

[When Words Keep People Alive](#)

[IABC Catalyst](#)



AFRICA CONFERENCE 2026

Leading the future of communication in Africa

Excellence | Innovation | Impact

The countdown to the IABC Africa Conference 2026 is officially underway.

Cape Town will host communication professionals from across the continent from 21-23 October 2026 for what promises to be Africa's premier communication conference.

This year's theme:

Leading the future of communication in Africa

Excellence | Innovation | Impact

IABC Africa, in partnership with AUDA-NEPAD, proudly presents Africa's premier communications conference of 2026.

Taking place in **Cape Town, South Africa, from 21-23 October 2026**, the event features a line-up of top-class speakers and covers all facets of strategic communication. If that is not enough, there are also six pre-conference masterclasses available for separate booking.

See the full programme on the website <https://www.iabc.co.za/iabc-africa-conference-2026/> and follow the registration link to reserve your seat.

The IABC Africa has partnered with the African Union (AU) and AUDA-NEPAD for the 2026 IABC Africa Conference. This partnership unites two leading pan-African organisations with a shared mission: advancing Africa's development through innovative and strategic communication.

Registration for the conference is being made easy by South Africa's premier events company, The Conference Hub <https://conferencehub.co.za/>, while IC Publications <https://icpublications.com/>, a leading pan-African media and communications group, has come on board as a media partner.

For more information:



email Enquiries: info@iabc.co.za



Website:
IABC Africa: www.iabc.co.za



LinkedIn: [IABC Africa](#)



Facebook: [IABC Africa](#)



Entries for the 2026 IABC Africa Silver Quill Awards are officially OPEN!

Great communication does more than inform; it inspires, influences and delivers measurable results. If you have led a campaign that made a real impact, now is the time to showcase your work. The 2026 IABC Africa Silver Quills Awards celebrate strategic communication excellence across Africa and recognise professionals and teams who are raising the standard of our profession. Take advantage of our Early Bird entry fees and start your awards journey today. We look forward to celebrating your success.

Early bird deadline & entry fee:



20 August 2026



ZAR1,299.00 / USD78.00 for members
ZAR1,899.00 / USD114.00 for non-members
ZAR300.00 / USD18.00 for Students

Final deadline & entry fee:



30 September 2026



ZAR1,899.00 / USD114.00 for members
ZAR2,499.00 / USD150.00 for non-members
ZAR350.00 / USD21.00 for Students

Ready to enter? Visit [here](#) to explore the categories, fees and submission requirements. For any queries, email info@iabc.co.za.

Why enter the IABC Africa Silver Quill Awards?

- ✓ Gain professional recognition
- ✓ Benchmark your work against industry best practice
- ✓ Demonstrate measurable business impact
- ✓ Strengthen your professional profile
- ✓ Celebrate communication excellence with peers from across Africa. Your work deserves recognition, and Silver Quills provides the platform to showcase it.





Member Spotlight

Excellence, Curiosity and Lifelong Learning

In Conversation with André Oberholzer, IABC Fellow, SCMP, FCSCE



Introduction

Andre Oberholzer has spent his career helping organisations connect strategy, reputation and stakeholder engagement. This year, his contribution to the profession was recognised through one of IABC's highest honours: Fellow status. In this conversation, he reflects on leadership, communication, certification and the future of the profession.

Q1. Congratulations on being named an IABC Fellow. What was your reaction when you received the news, and what does this recognition mean to you personally?

The process is daunting and nerve-racking! It starts with you being nominated (who me?), then with you having to put your whole professional life on paper – that took me 2 months to remember and find everything - and then an in-depth interview. A fascinating exercise in getting you to review and appreciate your professional life. Getting the call was honestly very humbling, but there is also a small measure of pride – other people think I've done a good job! I spent years doing what I love and being engaged in the profession because that is what gives me energy. But for me, being recognised also means I now have a responsibility – I represent something bigger than myself. As a communicator, I am no longer just Andre speaking for himself. I am speaking for myself and as a Fellow.

Q2. You were the first African to earn the SCMP designation, and now you've been recognised as an IABC Fellow. Looking back, what have been the defining moments of your professional journey?

I spent 14 years as a diplomat embracing very diverse and unconventional tasks, which ultimately helped when I moved to the private sector. I have now been at Sappi for 25 years (in September). One employer, one role, but so many different experiences, exposures, projects, opportunities over this time. I think the defining moments within all of this were always being open to participate; open to new things; not waiting for someone else; sometimes, not asking for permission but rather just doing; being exposed to super people; never losing my curiosity.

Q3. You've worked as a diplomat, led corporate affairs for a global organisation, served IABC Africa, and contributed internationally through the GCCC and other bodies. How have these diverse experiences shaped your approach to strategic communication?

I think it has been a cumulative journey. The one phase building on the next; the one experience informing the other; greater understanding coming from greater exposure. This can be true for everyone no matter their journey. For me it is about seeing a bigger picture and being able to connect the dots to help the business across a range of challenges.

Q4. Strategic communication continues to evolve rapidly with AI, changing stakeholder expectations and increasing organisational complexity. Which skills do you believe communicators need to develop to remain relevant over the next five years?

AI etc are tools, and offer great opportunities, and mastering them is useful, but in our modern unstable world our role remains to have the big picture, to see what is relevant or not for our organisation, to do scenario planning, to prep the execs for multiple possibilities. Be curious! Understand we drive fundamental value in our organisation. We are not a mere support function. Engage with that in mind across all the functions. We are at the table to bring our perspective, not agree with everyone else.



Member Spotlight continued

Excellence, Curiosity and Lifelong Learning

In Conversation with André Oberholzer, IABC Fellow, SCMP, FCSCE

Q5. Many communicators aspire to global recognition through certification, volunteering and awards, but aren't sure where to begin. What advice would you give them?

Do certification. There is a lot of help and structured programmes to prep; and it is a wonderful refresher journey. Before you volunteer, join in and participate in chapters or local communities. Enjoy the engagement, learn, share. Then the right opportunity to volunteer will present itself. Investigate awards, try and review the winning entries. Understand how to structure your work to meet entry criteria. Many great pieces of work never win because the building blocks for entry were not put in place from the start. If you become disciplined on that, probably you will see all your work (impact) increase.

Q6. IABC has been an important part of your professional journey. How has the association influenced your career, and why would you encourage others to become actively involved?

It gave me easy access to deep knowledge across all the fields of communication; I met colleagues from very different backgrounds in very different roles, but we always enjoy rich and stimulating engagements; it enabled me to understand Strategic Communication as a fundamental driver of corporate value – so I did not doubt my purpose at the top table. For others, maybe the younger generations – it is about Structure, community, opportunity. You cannot do everything alone, or in an ad hoc manner. Quality is never free. Time is your most precious resource. Associations like the IABC helps you get the most value out of the time you spend trying to learn and understand this profession.

Q7. As someone who has judged international awards and mentored communication professionals, what distinguishes truly exceptional communication from merely good communication?

Understanding the business need; securing buy-in and understanding of what effective comms will take; understand the target; and only then design the solution. When the business sees you are getting into the substance, they will respect you and your advice and solutions 10 times more.

Q8. Finally, if you could leave one message for communication professionals across Africa, what would it be?

Africa is too often not part of the mainstream; today it is super easy to become globally connected from anywhere. Be deliberate. Spend maybe 25% of your time connecting and engaging. Bring those learnings into your work. Ask your networks/colleagues. Your boss can also use AI. Make sure your value is beyond AI.

Rapid Fire

Book Every Communicator Should Read

Revenge of the Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell

Coffee or Tea?

Tea when it is very hot. Otherwise, coffee.

Best Career Advice

Know your weaknesses and manage them. Spend your time building your strengths.

Trend to Watch

Using AI to unlock knowledge trapped inside organisational archives.

One Word That Defines Great Communication

Listen.

Surprising Fact

"I loved playing squash, although I never won."





Thought Leadership

The Stories We Tell in a Season of Fear and Scarcity

Ilse Blank, SCMP®



A reflection from a communication professional on what this moment asks of South Africa's leaders.

It did not begin this week, or even this past month. The tension has been building for years. It has been stoked by frustration about jobs that never came, services that keep failing, and a future that feels smaller than the one we were promised. Over time, that pressure has hardened into finger-pointing and a search for someone to blame as a humanitarian failure plays out around undocumented migrants in South Africa.

A "deadline" that government never issued was taken at face value and vulnerable people were exploited by those who find their fear useful. Panic set in, and with it, any last remnants of the philosophy of Ubuntu were discarded in the intoxication of mob justice. Families packed what they could carry and slept on pavements outside consulates, trying to find a way home, with the full realisation that they were out of options. Whatever one believes about immigration, that painfully visceral image should give all of us pause. It is moments like this that shape a country's sense of itself and tell the world what to think about it. As the once proud Rainbow Nation, it is not our finest hour.

I work with business leaders across the continent on exactly how to manage the gap between the message we intend and the meaning that lands. What has unfolded in South Africa over recent weeks is, at its heart, both a communication story and a communication crisis. It is the story of how a complex problem is compressed into a simple, human-shaped target, and how myopic and ill-equipped leaders grow reckless in telling it.

Two things about this human tragedy are true. The first is that the grievances driving this anger are real. Unemployment is punishing. Clinics are overstretched, services falter, and many South Africans have waited a very long time for the dignity that was promised to them. To dismiss that pain as mere prejudice is to misread the moment and to insult people who are genuinely struggling.

The second is that none of that is solved by pointing at the most powerless people in the room. When we adopt a scarcity mindset, we make a vulnerable person the focus of an institution's failure, without fixing the institution. We simply move the anger somewhere it can do no good and a great deal of harm.

None of this lets the state off the hook. The failures are real, and unlike undocumented migrants, they have names and addresses and a place to call home. A public service hollowed out by years of neglect and corruption. Borders left porous by the very ministers charged with securing them — a leadership failure that has festered while ordinary people paid the price. But when those responsible for a functioning system fail at their jobs, they do not get to hand the bill to the most vulnerable people in the country. The honest answer to a broken institution is to fix it and hold its stewards to account, not to set upon the most vulnerable because they are within reach.

That substitution is a deliberate narrative being built with malicious intent by organisations with an agenda to destabilise our lagging economy even further. When credible leaders and institutions leave a vacuum where explanation and accountability should be, that vacuum gets filled. It gets filled by whoever offers the simplest story, and the simplest story is almost always the cruellest one: **it's not us, it's them.** Fear is an efficient editor. It cuts out nuance, history, and humanity, leaving only a target.



Thought Leadership continued

The Stories We Tell in a Season of Fear and Scarcity

Ilse Blank, SCMP®



Leaders set the tone. When those with platforms direct grievance toward institutions and demand accountability from them, they channel legitimate anger toward something that can actually change. When they instead direct that anger at the vulnerable — or, worse, stay silent while others do — they lend their authority to a story that ends in shame and destruction. And some have gone further, fanning the flames for their own advantage — tearing at our constitutional principles and hard-won democratic values that are meant to hold us together. **Silence, in moments like this, is a position, not neutrality.**

This is where leadership and communication meet, and why I believe we have a responsibility to tell our own story.

There is a reputational reckoning here that business leaders cannot afford to ignore. A nation's standing is one of its **most valuable intangible assets**, and it is built or eroded in exactly these moments. South Africa has long held a particular moral authority on this continent — a country that knows better than most what it costs when human beings are categorised and assigned a perceived value on the basis of gender, race and ethnicity.

Each appalling image of anger and vitriol in our streets, now carried on television screens around the world, spends down our cultural inheritance and diminishes this country's standing. There is a shame in this that we should be willing to name. The very same country that once dismantled the machinery of exclusion, and whose own exiles were sheltered across this continent, is losing sight of its role in Africa and the world. Investors, partners, tourists and the talented people we hope to attract to help build our economy are watching how we treat those with the least power among us. Trust, once lost, is expensive and difficult to rebuild.

With our country's reputation in peril, what does this moment ask of us?

It asks our leaders to acknowledge that the pain is real and the scapegoat of the hour is false. It asks us to resist the instant relief of a simple villain and to do the harder work of naming and fixing the actual failures — and the institutions and leaders responsible for them. **It asks communicators, in particular, to refuse our talents and stand our ground to promote any message that makes a frightened public feel briefly powerful by making someone else unsafe.**

I am not naive about how difficult this is to say when emotions run high. But **communication that only flatters fear cannot be disguised as leadership.** It is abdication dressed up as listening. The leaders I most admire are not populists. They are the ones who can hold a room's anger with respect and still turn it toward something worthy of it.

That is why this moment cannot belong only to politicians, commentators or those with the loudest platforms. It also belongs to communication professionals: the people who write the messages, advise leaders, shape narratives, and understand the difference between what is said and what is heard. We have a responsibility to do more than make words sound better. We have a moral and ethical responsibility to ask what our words make possible, what they will influence, who they protect, and who they put at risk.



Thought Leadership continued

The Stories We Tell in a Season of Fear and Scarcity

Ilse Blank, SCMP®

Perhaps this is an opportunity for communicators to renew our commitment to ethical communication, to challenge dangerous narratives before they harden, and to help our leaders tell stories that restore trust rather than spend it down.

We will be judged, in time, less by the problems we faced than by the stories we chose to tell about one another while facing them. The **cruel story** is already being written for us. It asks nothing of us but our silence. The **true story** asks more: courage, discipline and community. Our work is not done. I welcome your company in it.

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Editor's Note: The following article was originally published on LinkedIn by Ilse Blank, SCMP®, and is republished in Drumbeat with the author's permission.

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Africa's communication story is still being written.

Thank you for being part of it.

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